

Between Meaning and Becoming: Some Introductory Notes on Queering the Noise

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In reference to his contribution to the Museum of Modern Art exhibit *Soundings* (<http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2013/soundings/>), German sound artist Carsten Nicolai states, “Our body produces sound, our body is sound.” Calling out the presence of chaos within order, his work *wellenwanne lfo* (2012) (http://www.carstennicolai.de/?c=works&w=wellenwanne_lfo) challenges normativity by rendering the inaudible visible as the rippling waves in a water tank. By destabilizing the boundary between the phonic and the optic, Nicolai’s work effectively queers sound. Beyond merely representing the aural, *wellenwanne lfo* (2012) embodies sound. In this respect, it highlights some of the tensions between meaning and becoming that Queer the Noise means to engage. Instead of simply representing sound, Nicolai’s project engages the becoming of sound as a *body without organs*, which refuses the normative functioning of the body. Here, normative sensation blurs. In this Deleuzian move, we no longer just hear sound, we see sound, we feel sound, or as Nicolai states in the above description, we are sound. For us, this is an expression of our queer capability. Queerness is a refusal, a calling-out of, an I-forgot-to-even-notice normativity. This is not just sexual, yet it is always sexual and always bodily. When we realize the sounding capabilities of our bodies, what kinds of queer noise can we make?

As a disturbance that is primarily materialized through bodies, sound situates itself as a medium through which a body’s relationship to heteronormative temporalities, socialities, and desires can be mediated, disrupted, and transformed. Indeed, in a 2010 interview, Drew Daniel of Matmos argued for the essential queerness of sound itself. Defining queerness as what exceeds values and top-down structures, Daniel contended that because sound exists apart from language—and language is how systems of value are structured and imposed—it allows for the expression of desires and subjectivities that are otherwise unthinkable or unspeakable. While sound is here linked to the epistemological impossibilities that organize poststructural constructions of queerness, it also provides a starting point for thinking about the queer potentialities embedded in non-representational sound. Can we queer the noise, or is noise always-already queer? Does silence always equal queer death (all respect to ACT UP, notwithstanding) or can some silences speak queerly?

In different ways, the body of texts collected in this thread comprise a multimodal engagement with the intersection of queerness and aurality. In both format and formal characteristics, many of the included texts inhabit liminal generic spaces and hybrid media forms, continually threatening to push beyond existing format categories and, in doing so, continually gesture towards the perpetual coming-into-being that characterizes sound. Shanté Paradigm Smalls' piece combines autobiographical account, participant observation, and formal academic writing to more fully account for the ways in which beat-boxing "speaks" within hip hop communities even as the critically-aware academic writer attempts to speak "about" that community without drowning out the beat-boxer's sound. Andy Ditzler's recording blurs the lines between theory, aural ethnography, and critical intervention. Framed as an attempt to archive a site-specific "telling" of one queer-identified man's history, it is in the recording's failure to capture that telling as a "whole" (i.e., in ways that perpetuate the fantasy of unmediated access to the past by rendering the fact of recording invisible) that the piece's queer potentialities emerge. Although Yvette Janine Jackson's radio opera is marked more explicitly by formal artistic interventions, it, too, demonstrates archival dimensions even as it enacts a textual space of synaesthetic play by rendering the oppositional discursive construction of queerness and blackness audible.

Since queer soundings can only ever be heard in relation to the formations of institutional, cultural, and juridical power that have sought to silence non-heteronormative desires, practices, and experiences, the mutual constitution of sound and space that Shaffer pointed to in *Soundscape* (1977) takes on a particular meaning in relation to queer aurality. Indeed, even as queer soundings signify the failed silencing of queer voices and experiences, we hear queer sounds as inextricably marked by the local social, spatial, and cultural cartographies from which they emerge even as (or perhaps especially when) they open up new spaces for articulating and enacting non-normative histories and subjectivities. Throughout Meredith Heil's *Whistlin' Dixie*, we see the ways in which music provides a space for queer world-building, self-making and community formation in a region typically understood by urban queer communities as antithetical to queer life. In mainstream, cosmopolitan queer culture, rural spaces in the Midwest and the South are spaces of death — either literal death (as in the well-publicized murders of Brandon Teena and Matthew Sheppard, among others) or the symbolic death of the closet, with its attendant silences and pervasive isolation — and yet Heil's piece repopulates these spaces with queer music and, more to the point, with queer voices capable of speaking to their own histories, experiences, and desires. In Andy Ditzler's project, silences — or, rather, abeyances in orality — create the conditions of possibility for an engagement with queer historical moments that recognizes and responds to the mutual constitution of past and present, tracing out the ways in which the telling (and hearing) of queer histories is saturated by the social, material, and environmental conditions of its telling, recording, and listening. Listening to his recording of a public performance of queer oral history, we hear the ecology of silences, whispers, noises, and distortions that

circulate within, and are produced by, the queer archive as a call to enter into the immersive space of queer memory. Rather than equating silence with death, Ditzler's recording reminds us of the generative possibilities that emerge from "not the telling of a story but the hearing of it, in the in-between spaces where queer people thrive."

Indeed, many of the pieces included in this thread invite us to hear the queer potentialities embedded in moments of imperfect or impossible transmission. Distortion, sustain, glitch, repetitions with a difference, and differences which can never be repeated...all of these take on new dimensions of meaning in relation to queerness's embrace of the unstable, the ephemeral, the perverse, and the unspeakable. Daniel J Sander's article specifically takes up noise as a tactic that enacts "the stigmatizing cut of queerness" in ways that take up contamination, fragmentation, abjection, and melancholia as modes of queer subjectivity and sociality. By tracing the echoic afterlives of Foreigner's "I Want To Know What Love Is" in explicitly queer texts, Sander links the aural contamination of the original song to practices of queer world-building and self-making that inhabit those spaces which cannot be redeemed by the logics of capitalist production and reproductive futurity.

As many submissions point to in direct and indirect ways, the boundaries of "noise" — like the boundaries of "queer" — are never stable, but are in fact defined by what exceeds, what goes beyond, what cannot be contained, what cannot be represented or spoken. In this sense, Elisa Kreisinger's video presents a queer noise not in the phonic sense, but in the epistemological sense. If we understand "noise" to be not just a sonic phenomenon but also a register of value and an epistemological precondition (i.e., noise is what must be edited out for sound to have any stable meaning), then Elisa Kreisinger's clever reworking of the dialogue from *Mad Men* introduces to the show's portrayal of 1950s corporate and advertising culture a queer noise that makes audible the homoerotic desires and potentialities that are always already embedded in these spaces. Sound and silence are crucial to this intervention, for the desires that are otherwise unspeakable in this space are articulated in and through silences. By making silences not only speak, but speak queerly, Kreisinger inverts the pattern of silencing that has historically been used to render queer desires publicly unspeakable. In contrast, Amalle Dublon's piece takes up extensity — the drawing out of certain sounds in verbal speech — as a phonic gesture that exceeds the temporal (and we might argue productive) regulations of merely representative, coded speech. In doing so, extensity creates what Dublon describes as "a kind of anticipatory penumbra that halos and holds the unstable coordination of mutual respondents." Here, Dublon's work seemingly provides an entry point into imagining queer community-formation as a project made possible by phonic excess.

Several of the pieces in this thread demonstrate the ways in which an engagement in the phonic intersections between queerness and blackness can point to the materiality of desire and its constitutive effect on conceptions of historical trauma, erasure, and futurity. In *In*

the Break, Fred Moten turns to sound as an epistemic force for reanimating the aporias of black historical subjectivity in ways that haunt the present by disrupting the linear temporalities and teleologies of progress. Hilary Berwick's annotated playlist suggests that black musical practices enact temporal interventions within which currents of desire, identification and memory reshape the boundaries of what is representable. Indeed, Berwick's discussion of haunting as a primary mode of hip hop representation demonstrates the potential contributions that engagements with sonic culture could make to explorations of the erotic and psychoanalytic dimensions of black historical memory and practices of remembrance, particularly as it relates to reckoning with trauma. In a different (though related) context, Yvette Janine Jackson's radio opera, *Invisible People*, demonstrates the fragmentary effects produced by aural haunting by combining samples of instrumental music, creaking, sermons, sound bytes, non-verbal vocalizations, and non-representational noises to reproduce the impossible position of the queer black subject in the disjunction between homophobia in the African American community and racism in the gay rights community. The result is a deeply unsettling aural space, a fragmented, multi-layered soundscape haunted by jazz, distortions, exclusionary speech acts, and illegible sounds — acoustic markers that map out a political, cultural and sonic topography that refuses to provide the listener with a stable, cohesive orientation. The prominence of electronic distortion here gestures towards a queer black futurity even as the unspeakability of a queer black subject seemingly forecloses that possibility.

The pieces in *Queer the Noise* give us a variety of ways to engage with the semiotic and social meanings embedded in specific sounds and to explore the ontological resonance of sounds on (and of) non-normative bodies. The issues raised by this constellation of texts have implications not just for sound studies and queer theory, but also for this continuing academic and artistic struggle between representation and becoming. Subverting the boundary between critique and representation, the pieces collected here highlight ways of knowing and speaking about queerness that have not traditionally been privileged in the academic world. In this respect, the pieces collected in this thread constitute an epistemological noise within the academe, highlighting the boundaries of current scholarship while gesturing towards new ways of knowing and speaking queerly just on the horizon.